

United States Department of the Interior

BUREAU OF LAND MANAGEMENT

Mount Lewis Field Office

50 Bastian Road

Battle Mountain, Nevada 89820

Phone: 775-635-4000

Fax: 775-635-4034

http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/battle_mountain_field.html

In Reply Refer To:
LLNVB0000 (4700)

DEC 23 2014

Dear Reader:

The Preliminary Environmental Assessment (EA) for the Fish Creek Herd Management Area (HMA) will be available for your review and comment on December 23, 2014. The document may be viewed on-line at the link given here. Hard copies are available from the Mount Lewis Field Office.

http://www.blm.gov/nv/st/en/fo/battle_mountain_field/blm_programs/wild_horse_and_burro/Fish_Creek_Wild_Horse_Gather.html.

The EA analyzes the potential direct, indirect and cumulative effects to the human environment associated with implementation of Population Growth Suppression (PGS) in conjunction with various types of gather methods to successfully treat mares with fertility control, and remove excess wild horses from the range. Should a determination be made that implementation of the Proposed Action or alternative actions would not result in "significant environmental impacts" a Finding of No Significant Impact (FONSI) will be prepared to document that determination, and a Decision Record issued providing the rationale for approving the chosen alternative.

The proposed gather area is located south of Eureka, Nevada in Eureka County. The Fish Creek HMA extends south of U.S. Highway 50 encompassing portions of Antelope Valley, the Fish Creek Range and the Antelope Range. The HMA is administered by the Mount Lewis Field Office (MLFO). The Appropriate Management Level (AML) for the Fish Creek HMA is 101-170 wild horses, with a current estimated population of 549 wild horses.

The Proposed Action would involve implementation of a long term management plan with the objective of slowing population growth and achieving the established AML over the next ten years. The Proposed Action includes an initial gather to be completed in 2015 which would include the capture of 500-549 wild horses. The fertility control vaccine PZP (Porcine zona pellucida) or other current formulation would be applied to mares released back to the range (estimated 150-175 mares) to slow population growth. Approximately 300-349 wild horses would be released back to the range following the gather, with approximately 200 excess wild horses transported to BLM Wild Horse and Burro Facilities to be prepared for adoption to the public.

Due to National funding and holding space limitations, and anticipated gather efficiencies, the BLM cannot achieve the goals of the Proposed Action and attain the established AML through a single gather in 2015. The 2015 gather would therefore become the first phase in a long term population management strategy designed to address large scale wild horse gathers while still achieving BLM's management goals of attaining AML, reducing population growth rates, and obtaining a thriving natural ecological balance on the range as identified within the Wild Free Roaming Horses and Burros Act (1971).

Long term management goals for the Fish Creek HMA includes management of a healthy population of wild horses through achievement and maintenance of the established AML (101-170 wild horses) and continued implementation of PGS. Under the Proposed Action, the BLM would continue to implement fertility control through bait and water trapping, darting and helicopter gathers. Darting could be utilized to booster treat mares initially treated with PZP-22. Bait and water trapping could be used to booster mares and retreat or initially treat mares with PZP-22, and provide for limited removals. Helicopter gathers would occur as needed to continue the population growth control protocols, remove excess wild horses and to achieve or maintain the established AML. Fertility control would be applied to all the released mares to decrease the future annual population growth and reduce the number of excess wild horses that would have to be removed during future gathers. Removals of excess wild horses could be implemented through the life of the plan to achieve the management targets, to relieve resource concerns and/or remove concentrated groups of excess wild horses both inside and outside the boundaries of the Fish Creek HMA.

The Fish Creek HMA has been experiencing Severe and Extreme drought conditions since 2012, resulting in drought stressed vegetation, reduced forage production and lack of water for wild horses. In order to prevent emergency conditions, the MLFO began hauling water to two locations in the HMA in 2012, in addition to operating a well and a large pipeline/trough system to provide water to the population of wild horses.

The current population exceeds the established AML. The MLFO needs to implement this PGS and wild horse removal in order to reduce population growth rates, manage wild horses within identified HMA boundaries, achieve and maintain AML, remove excess wild horses from within and outside of HMA boundaries, and ensure a thriving natural ecological balance. Please refer to the EA for more detail about these HMAs and the proposed wild horse gather, and analysis of the potential impacts of the Proposed Action.

The Fish Creek HMA EA includes provisions to prevent injury and reduce stress to wild horses during the gather operations. In addition, the BLM Comprehensive Animal Welfare Policy (Instruction Memorandum 2013-059) would be followed. This policy can be reviewed here, and is also available as an Appendix to the EA:

http://www.blm.gov/wo/st/en/info/regulations/Instruction_Memos_and_Bulletins/national_instruction/2013/IM_2013-059.html The BLM is committed to the well-being and responsible care of wild horses and burros we manage. At all times, the care and treatment provided by the BLM and the gather contractors will be characterized by *compassion and concern* for the animal's well-being and welfare needs.

It is estimated that most of the wild horses removed in the 2015 gather would be 3 years of age or younger, and would be highly adoptable. The Fish Creek HMA includes a large portion of roan colored horses in addition to palomino, buckskin, bay and brown. A special on-site adoption is tentatively planned to occur in Eureka, Nevada in conjunction with the gather, where 10-15 young weanlings and yearlings will be offered to the qualified public for adoption.

This Preliminary EA is being provided to the interested public for review for 30 days from December 23 through January 23, 2014. Please submit comments, issues, alternatives, recommendations, or other input for inclusion into the Final EA. In order to provide meaningful input, please submit comments that are applicable to the proposed wild horse gather, referencing the Preliminary EA where possible.

Interested individuals should mail written comments to the BLM Mount Lewis Field Office, 50 Bastian Road, Battle Mountain, NV, 89820, attention Michael Vermeys, Acting Field Manager. Comments may also be provided through e-mail to this address: 2014FishCreekGather@blm.gov. Be advised that *only*

the comments received by postal mail or to this specific e-mail address will be considered in the completion of the Final EA, FONSI and Decision.

Before including your address, phone number, e-mail address, or other personal identifying information in your comment, you should be aware that your entire comment, including your personal identifying information, may be made publicly available at any time. While you can ask us in your comment to withhold your personal identifying information from public review, we cannot guarantee that we will be able to do so. If you would rather not remain on the mailing list for the Fish Creek HMA wild horse gather, and do not wish to receive subsequent documents, please submit your request in writing to the MLFO.

Anyone interested in attending the Fish Creek Wild Horse On-Site Adoption planned to occur with the proposed gather is encouraged to contact the MLFO to receive updated information about the date, location and the horses that will be offered, as it becomes available. Note that additional information will also be posted on the Fish Creek Gather website at the link given at the beginning of this letter.

All comments received during the public comment period will be fully considered and evaluated for preparation of the Final EA. If you have any questions, please contact Shawna Richardson, Mount Lewis Field Office Wild Horse and Burro Specialist, at (775) 635-4181.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Michael Vermeys". The signature is fluid and cursive, with a large, sweeping initial "M".

Michael Vermeys
Acting Field Manager,
Mount Lewis Field Office

